

# ILLUSIONS OF OPPORTUNITY

## THE AMERICAN DREAM IN QUESTION

"All Americans concerned about the current retreat from using public policy to combat social inequality should read this thoughtful book."

—William Julius Wilson

Malcolm Wiener Professor of Social Policy,  
John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

JOHN E. SCHWARZ

# **ILLUSIONS OF OPPORTUNITY**

*Also by John E. Schwarz*

**America's Hidden Success:  
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**The Forgotten Americans**

*(with Thomas J. Volgy)*

# **Illusions of** *Opportunity*

**The American Dream in Question**

**John E. Schwarz**



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**For my teachers**



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## **PROLOGUE**

**F**or some time I've been troubled by the fact that a number of families I've met who work hard cannot seem to support themselves adequately despite trying to find better paying work. I wrote this book with the story in mind of the Bartelles, a family whom I interviewed at considerable length. Ernst Bartelle was 57 years old at the time of our interview. I got to know him as an intelligent, honest, and responsible person who had worked full-time his whole life. To my mind he was a person of remarkable integrity. He was a maintenance worker at a school a few miles from his home in Denver. He and his family, consisting of his wife, Anna, and two teenage children, had so little money that sometimes they went for days eating only potatoes or potatoes and eggs in order to get by. Anna, who had a full-time clerical job, said to me, "You ever seen a

hamster in a cage? It just runs and runs on its wheel and gets nowhere. That's what I feel like sometimes." Ernst had tried unsuccessfully to get other jobs. Believing in America as a land of opportunity, Ernst took responsibility for his and his family's condition. Although he had earned a high-school degree at a time when that was deemed sufficient qualification for success and when many of his peers had not, he believed that he could have done something differently. Assuming the blame, he saw himself as a failure, as worthless. In considerable pain, he had even considered suicide.

I interviewed a number of families facing hard times that, like the Bartelles, accepted personal responsibility. Still others I interviewed, by contrast, had very different explanations for their misfortune. Some blamed a system that they thought helped the rich and hurt the poor, or they blamed the economy; others blamed a spouse or a boss; a few blamed the government; and some believed that their experiences were the product of plain bad luck. Whatever their reaction or explanation, whether they blamed themselves or others, the essentials of their experiences were similar: responsible behavior and a lot of hard work over many years had led nowhere. These families had not been able to control their lives in a manner that they believed to be adequate. Without exception, the experiences had left them distraught.

I wrote this book in the belief—and the hope—that it matters to Americans whether or not their nation lives up to the ethos to which it subscribes. The ethos voices the fundamental belief of Americans in the power and the capacity of the individual. It expresses the American idea that the opportunity exists in this abundant land for individuals of strong character who are willing to work hard and persevere to get ahead and find a measure of success. By dint of their own efforts, given the opportunity that exists in America, all Americans can make a

decent living and take care of themselves, the ethos says. All Americans can be independent. I believe that whether the nation lives up to this ethos matters morally in terms of right and wrong and substantively in terms of the spirit and quality of life that both the nation and its people enjoy. The Bartelles' story raises questions about the validity of the American ethos, questions to which we cannot be indifferent.

Many readers, I imagine, will feel some sympathy at hearing the stories of the Bartelles and the others. The question that needs to be answered, however, is who bears responsibility for the Bartelles' situation. What is particularly important for the nation to determine is whether the experiences of families like the Bartelles are reasonably within their own control and thus are primarily their responsibility, or whether the outcomes are essentially beyond their personal control. Were only a handful of families to have these experiences, perhaps there would be little reason for our interest. However, the possibility exists that these stories describe the circumstances of millions of families. How we ultimately view the moral and substantive success of America, how we see our obligations toward our fellow Americans, and how we interpret the economic and social problems facing the nation hinge on how commonplace the Bartelles' story is and whether American families do in fact have a reasonable level of control over their own destinies.

The evidence seems compelling that ample opportunity exists for anyone who wants it and is willing to put in the effort. During the past three decades, the American economy has grown at a speed near the growth rate that England experienced during the zenith of the Industrial Revolution. It has generated literally tens of millions of new jobs in those thirty years. It seems that no economy growing this fast could lack decent opportunities for people willing to take advantage of them. Yet

I cannot dismiss the Bartelles and their story, and similar stories of other hardworking and caring families.

The evidence presented in this book is in part based on first-ever measurements of the availability of decent-paying jobs nationally. Set within the context of elemental principles fundamental to the nation ever since its birth, the discussion will show that the number of Americans closed out of minimally adequate opportunity surpasses the total populations of the one hundred largest American cities combined. The number left out amounts to nearly four times the population of the entire metropolitan area of New York City. This sizable shortage of opportunity for American families is not new but has existed now for more than three decades. It carries enormous implications for a wide range of national problems. Until the nation squarely faces the reality of the scarcity of opportunity raised in these pages, it will be unable to attain a lasting rebirth.\*

To confront these issues, the nation must find the path to reconcile two powerful world views. The first of these accents the idea of the free market, the second emphasizes the idea of the equal moral worth of human beings. These two ideas are often seen to be the same, yet they are not. The importance of the distinction between the two, and its consequences for clarifying the choices facing the nation, will become clear as the discussion unfolds.

What the nation needs is leadership with the vision to identify the problems we face candidly and the courage to create and promote honest solutions. To fail to act represents no less than a national repudiation of the American Dream, a denunciation of the very soul of the nation.

\*Issues about statistics on inflation have arisen recently that cast doubt on previous calculations of the worth of workers' wages after inflation. Such issues do not affect the conclusions of this book, however, as Appendix C shows.

# ILLUSIONS OF OPPORTUNITY



# I

Chapter

## THE PROBLEM

**D**isquieting doubts have crept into America's consciousness over the past thirty years. Mounting social pathologies, troubling economic uncertainties, and rising political disillusion have left many feeling that something is wrong, that the nation's bright lustre has become tarnished, that the nation has somehow lost its way. To ascertain the root of our fears, recover our moral bearings, and renew the nation's sense of purpose, we must begin at the beginning: with our fundamental principles, with our basic creed. In Abraham Lincoln's words, America is dedicated to a proposition.

The nation's creed asserts the moral equality of all. Belief in it connects each of us to the whole and thus to one another. It gives us a sense of shared fate, despite the centrifugal forces of our many ethnic, racial, and religious differences, and the great



importance we attach to individuality. The glue that binds an immensely diverse people cannot be a common blood or unifying religion, but must instead be a shared idea, a secular religion (from the Latin for “tying together”) that supplies us with a common sense of our responsibilities to one another. George Will thus rightly describes us as a creedal, not a tribal, nation.<sup>1</sup> And as Francis Fukuyama points out in *The End of History and the Last Man*, communities that share a language or creed based on good and evil will be far more enduring than those based simply on self-interest. In effect, the message of our creed, what it requires of us, and the place it holds in our tradition are tantamount to describing the genetic and familial ties that the English have with one another, or the French, or the Germans.<sup>2</sup> Out of our enormous array of differences, it is what makes us one people.

A central component of this creed is called the American Ethos, or the American Dream. Every American today instinctively knows the ethos: that every individual should be able to get ahead and gain some measure of success through actions and means that are under his or her own control.<sup>3</sup> Roger Angell describes it as the faith that we all belong somewhere within a rational and forgiving system that in the end rewards hard work, intelligence, and sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> The ethos is that everyone who steadfastly practices certain practical virtues will find a place at the table. No one need be left out, unless he or she voluntarily chooses to be. These virtues—self-control, discipline, effort, perseverance, and responsibility—stand at the core of our sense of morality and our idea of good character, and are essential to the success and safety of a good society. To fail to reward them would be to diminish and devalue them as virtues. No value survives forever on incantations alone.